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BOOK REVIEWS

Below the James. A Plantation Sketch. By WILLIAM CABELL BRUCE. The Neale Publishing Company, New York, 1918. Pp. 157.

This book is, as its title imports, a plantation sketch dealing with that sort of life in Virginia just after the Civil War. While it is a mere story and hardly a dramatic one, it throws light on the Negro as a constituent part of the southern society of that day. As a student at Harvard before the War a southerner comes into contact with a fellow student from Massachusetts, to whom he becomes bound by such strong ties that the four years of bloody conflict between the sections are not sufficient to sever this connection. Some years after this upheaval friend thinks of friend and soon the northerner finds himself on his way to visit the southern friend.

Coming to the South at the time when the Negroes as a new class in their different situation were endeavoring to readjust themselves under difficult circumstances, the observations of the traveler are of much value to the historian. He not only saw much to admire in the colonial seats of prominent southerners like Patrick Henry and John Randolph, but showed an appreciation of the simple life of the Negroes. Their new position as freemen taking a part in the government, the rôle of the carpetbagger, and the undesirable conditions of that régime play some part in the story.

As to the Negroes themselves, however, the most interesting revelations are those dealing with the inner life of the blacks. In the language used to impersonate the blacks the reader sees a philosophy of life; in their mode of living appears the virtue of a noble peasantry; and in their worship of divinity there is the striving of a righteous people willing to labor and to wait. In this respect the book is valuable. We have known too little of the plantation, too little of the life of the Negro before the Civil War, too little of how he during the Reconstruction developed into something above and beyond the hewer of wood and drawer of water. While not primarily historical then and falling far short of being an historical novel, this book is unconsciously informing and therefore interesting and valuable to the student of Negro life and history.